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The Evolution of the Bundeswehr following the end of the Cold War, up to the Russo-Ukraine War

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Abstract

This research paper assesses the evolution of the Bundeswehr from the end of the Cold War until the present day. The paper is split into 5 parts. I) The German Bundeswehr, II) ISAF Experience, III) Manpower Shortage, IV) Material Deficit, V) German Strategic Culture and VI) 'Zeitenwende.' Methodology used in this paper varies from primary sources such as government papers and interviews to surveys and newspaper & scholarly articles. This paper has highlighted the problems surrounding the Bundeswehr, and analyzing 'Zeitenwende,' concluding that Germany is still far-off in solving its problems and as of present day, 'Zeitenwende' only looks

like a 'knee-jerk' reaction to the war in Ukraine and not a well-thought-out re-militarization problem with strategic aims.

Introduction

On February 27th, 2022, the German Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz made it clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine must not remain without consequences in regard to German security and defense policy. Stating: "Wir müssen deutlich mehr in die Sicherheit unseres Landes investieren, um auf diese Weise unsere Freiheit und unsere Demokratie zu schützen. Das ist eine große nationale Kraftanstrengung. Das Ziel ist eine leistungsfähige, hochmoderne, fortschrittliche Bundeswehr, die uns zuverlässig schützt."¹ This is the most direct statement from a high administrative figure in Germany regarding re-armament since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Stating that to protect freedom and democracy, a major national effort must be undertaken for an efficient and ultra-modernization Bundeswehr.

The Bundeswehr, the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany. Split into the Heer (Army), Deutsche Marine (Navy) and the Luftwaffe (Air Force). Has been at the center of German national & international debate since the end of Nazi Germany. Questions of its relevance, danger and/or effectiveness have been rising since its conception in 1955; considering the actions of Hitler's Wehrmacht in World War 2. The war-time death toll of 55 million had convinced the Allies that Prussian Militarism will never be able to return (Forces News). Yet, the Korean war and the apparent sturdiness of Communist armies in Korea begged the question whether the Soviet Army could do the same in Europe. Thus, the original idea of leaving post-Nazi Germany without a military was abandoned, and the Bundeswehr was born. The Bundeswehr held a crucial role in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) as it bordered the Soviet Empire and if any conflict should arise, Germany would be the

¹ Translate: "We must invest significantly more in the security of our country in order to protect our freedom and our democracy. This is a major national effort. The goal is a powerful, ultra-modern, progressive Bundeswehr that reliably protects us." (Lehning)

main battleground (Noetzel and Schreer 212). However, they could only operate in Germany.

Since its inception, the Bundeswehr was a much more liberal & progressive military than its Wehrmacht predecessor; with the main doctrine of "citizen in Uniform." Thus, a completely different culture was created, with the old Prussian doctrine being abandoned. The "institutional framework of government, allies' expectations and reservations, and force structure itself all served to prevent the Bundeswehr from developing into a strategic government resource." This view is also shared by Ron Asmus, writing: "The tight integration of Germany in the alliance was designed to prevent independent German strategic thinking from emerging." (Asmus 11). The result of government restrictions on the Bundeswehr meant they had no military strategic ambitions and held (at times) semi-sovereignty in military strategic affairs (Paterson 174). While this changed following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, with legal and political barriers on the use of force and the use of the Bundeswehr abroad, being lifted (Noetzel and Schreer 212). Since its participation in the 1999 NATO's air campaign against Serbia, the Bundeswehr joined the ranks of European militaries serving abroad, focusing on counterinsurgency.

With discussions surrounding the Bundeswehr being re-ignited following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, with the realities of a potential territorial conflict being more real than ever. EU (European Union) armies (including the Bundeswehr) now understand that they can no longer 'decide' which conflicts to intervene, as they could since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Germany economically dominates Europe, and with a GDP of 4 trillion USD (World Economic Forum), it has always been major player in economic policies; instead of military and defense. However, Germany's population and politicians are still wary of the Bundeswehr and Prussian Militarism, as shown by its cautious approach to military aid to Ukraine (Lubold & Gordon 2023). Thus, begging the question of what role will the Bundeswehr play in the Europe of post-invasion?

This research paper will be discussing the Germany's Bundeswehr by looking at its

experience in Afghanistan, discussing its manpower shortage, material deficit and the problem of German strategic culture. Finally, Chancellor's Scholz's 'Zeitenwende' (Turning Point) policy will be analyzed and how it will affect the Bundeswehr.

Literature Review

Literature surrounding this topic has highlighted the Bundeswehr inability, representing it as an Armed Force which is starving in material and manpower front. The literature specifically highlights the negative experience of the Bundeswehr in Afghanistan with the source "The Afghanistan Papers," the manpower issue was highlighted in Noetzel & Schreer's research in "All the Way? The Evolution of German Military Power," along with the cultural strategic culture that affects the Bundeswehr and defense policy. Material issues being highlighted in Schmitt's report, "Germany A U-Turn on Defense." Government reports for the Federal Ministry of Defense and the Chiefs of Defense also highlighted the problems of the Bundeswehr.

Methodology

Data will be collected in a qualitative manner, by analyzing government Strategic Papers and Reports on the Bundeswehr by German Chiefs of Defence. These primary sources are most cited sources and support data emphasized by secondary sources. Analyzing material, manpower and the 'Zeitenwende' policy was done by using primary sources, supported by secondary sources such as news articles, websites, videos, and books. Examination of the Bundeswehr's experience with ISAF was mostly taken from Lessons Learned Interviews in the book "The Afghanistan Papers." Finally, regarding German Strategic Culture, secondary sources were used to explain strategic culture. Examples from WW2 and government laws showing the negative strategic culture Germans have been highlighted. Surveys were used as primary sources to support the analysis with numbers.

The State of the Bundeswehr

With the turn of the millennium, the Bundeswehr saw itself entering a new lifespan. Having participated in the 1999 air campaign against Serbia proved that Germany could meet the expectations of its allied partners. Most importantly, Germany was able to confront the hesitant domestic security culture by demonstrating to the German government and political parties that public opinion was willing to support the use of military power abroad (even without the authorization by the UN Security Council) (Noetzel and Schreer 212). Thus, Germany saw the opportunity for the Bundeswehr to play a greater role in "international security and stability ... commensurate with its political and economic strength" (ibid 212). This went in-line with NATO's changing doctrine from collective security to international security actor (ibid). The foundation of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) in 1999 also gave another front for which the Bundeswehr and German defense industry (i.e Rheinmetall, Heckler & Koch) could expand in, participating in European military operations.

Following 9/11, German troops saw deployment in Afghanistan. Participating in NATO's International Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF). Western & European strategy makers moved from the "classical territorial defence" theories of high-intensity warfare to transnational threats of terrorism and the fact that serious threats can be manifested in western societies, ignoring geographic boundaries (Zeikow 23-4). With defense policy becoming a priority for Germany, the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder introduced the new defence policy guidelines (DPG). The 'Konzeption der Bundeswehr' (KdB) outlined the changes for the Bundeswehr. Here, the Bundeswehr future structure would be consisting of three elements:

- I. 35.000 troops for front-line combat operations. These men would take part in the NATO Response Force (NRF) and other operations (Bundesministerium der Verteidigung).
- II. 70,000 troops allocated "for stability and reconstruction operations". These forces would be used in low-intensity conflicts (ibid).

- III. 147,500 troops allocated for logistic jobs, both abroad and at home (ibid).

This structure was aimed for implementation by 2010 and has largely been successful. The government of Chancellor Angela Merkel also introduced a defense white paper in 2006 (White Paper 2006); which reprioritized strategic aims for the Bundeswehr with an expanded focus on operations abroad and spanning multiple mission spectrums. However, the Bundeswehr's problems were still not addressed, and deficiencies became obvious in its operations in Afghanistan. ISAF showed that the Bundeswehr was "critically short of specialized units which are in high demand in counterinsurgency operations" (Noetzel and Schreer 217). These units include highly trained, regular infantry, a great number of special forces and a massive network of assistance units such as Close Air Support (CAS) from the Luftwaffe and on-call artillery batteries (ibid 217).

ISAF Experience

The Bundeswehr attracted considerable frustration from the U.S and other allied militaries on the ground with ISAF. As mentioned in the book "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," Craig Whitlock uses the Lessons Learned Interviews done by high U.S officials to mention the Bundeswehr restrictions which "bordered on the ridiculous" (107). Germany would not allow its soldiers to operate in joint combat missions with other allied militaries, disallowing night patrols and ordering its men to remain in the low-intensity region of northern Afghanistan. "Yet it permitted them to enjoy copious amounts of alcohol. In 2007, the German government shipped 260,000 gallons of home-brewed beer and 18,000 gallons of wine to the war zone for its 3,500 troops" (106). This is in stark contrast with U.S. troops that did most of the fighting and who could not consume alcohol under General Order 1 of the U.S. military which "prohibited the consumption of alcohol on U.S bases to avoid offending Afghanistan's teetotaling Muslims." (107). Frustration was

highlighted by Nicholas Burns, U.S ambassador to NATO under President Bush, stating in a Lessons Learned Interview that “We felt we were giving it our all, and we didn’t always feel that way about some of the allies,” “Juggling the patchwork of capabilities and restrictions took nerve and patience” (107). Such denial of assistance would be seen when allied ISAF forces would request the aid of German fighter-bomber aircraft such as the Tornado. Such requests would often be denied, with German officers stating that it “could only be used in certain emergencies” (107). This showed that although the German government tried to present the Bundeswehr as a reliable force (as shown in its intervention in Serbia in 1999), it showed the opposite. Especially when troops on the ground were limited due to legal reasons which stated that their operational restrictions must reflect the same operation rules under peacetime in Germany.

Attempted reforms such as ‘Neuorientierung’ in 2011 by Chancellor Angela Merkel, which aimed to consolidate the Bundeswehr in light of the 2007-08 financial crisis, which saw the cut of 8 billion Euros in defense spending (Die Reform der Bundeswehr). This created a pattern of defense cuts, as evident from the 2011 Defense Policy Guidelines which reduced the Bundeswehr’s force from 250,000 military and 75,000 civilian personnel to 185,000 active-duty military and civilian personnel (Defence Policy Guidelines). This guideline does not show which of these active-duty military personnel would be allocated for combat action, specialized weapon systems are also reduced. Another problem for the Bundeswehr is recruitment.

Manpower Shortage

The Bundeswehr struggles to uphold its 185,000 military personnel. Since the removal of conscription on January 1st, 2011 (Bundeswehr), recruitment has not been adequate. The main reason for the abolishment of conscription was a budgetary one. Conscripts were not going to be deployed in conflict zones, the requirement to train and equip conscripts that would not go abroad took up a large amount of funds

(Schmitt 104). Within the context of the 2007-2008 financial crisis this was an even bigger problem than before. Thus, it was believed that the end of conscription would free up resources, allowing the Bundeswehr to become a smaller, more professional force (104). However, resources and funds were not freed up as expected and led to manpower problems (104). This is seen in the Annual Report 2019 from the Bundestag, reporting that from every two applications to the Bundeswehr, only one would enter (Bundestag). This is in stark contrast to the median sixteen applications for every job in the private sector (Schmitt 104). But this is the challenge of a healthy economy, where individuals of young ages (prime time to be in the Armed Forces) prefer to join the private sector (ibid 104). Ursula Von der Leyen, former Defense Minister of Defense had recognized this problem in 2013, stating that a priority of her tenure as minister would be to increase recruitment numbers (Zu dick, zu pazifistisch, nicht deutsch 2019). The 'trendwende personal' (trend reversal in personnel) was the name of this reform, which attempted to portray the Bundeswehr as a more attractive and more family-friendly work environment (Schmitt 105). Here, her experience and connections in her previous appointment as the Federal Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth came into play. Nevertheless, manpower shortages remained a consistent problem, the only reason there are more service members registered in the Bundeswehr is due to service extensions and an increased retirement age (ibid 106). Which hints at another potential long-term problem, the Bundeswehr becoming an older force.

Material Deficits

The Bundeswehr also holds a massive material deficit. Reports of grounded planes not being maintained for months or years, broomsticks used in training exercises instead of actual weapons and soldiers buying their own military equipment (especially winter equipment) from private retailers are but a few problems the modern Bundeswehr has (Noack). According to the "report on the material operational readiness of the Bundeswehr's main weapon systems" presented by the

German Chief of Defense to the Bundestag (German Federal Assembly) Defense Committee in 2020, the weapon readiness of the Bundeswehr lies at around 70% (Bericht zur Materiellen Einsatzbereitschaft 2020). Meaning that only 70% of weapons systems would be effectively used in conflicts. Concerning other weapons systems, readiness is much lower. For example, readiness for helicopters lies at 40%, the readiness of the Puma Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV) lies only at 30% (ibid).

It is important to note that the weapons systems mentioned are integral for modern warfare. They act as the most essential parts of modern warfare. Without helicopters, combat units are unable to request medical evacuations, combat shorties and/or reconnaissance. Without the Puma IFV, the army units designated for front line duty are essentially forced to fight on foot without any armored vehicle to support basic combat operations. In 2000, the Bundeswehr had 2,000 tanks in its arsenal, compared to only 260 in 2022 (how many of these 260 tanks can be operated is another question, as many are used to maintain actual active tanks) (Schmitt 103). Regarding the Deutsche Marine, the 2019 report by the Chief of Defense noted that none of the submarines in the Deutsch Marine are operable (Bericht zur Materiellen Einsatzbereitschaft 2019). Material problems resonate from the 2011 reforms, with new procurements being put off, existing orders for material significantly being reduced and maintenance of spare parts being reduced. Furthermore, the defense procurement process is inherently dysfunctional. Former Defense Minister, Von der Leyen had appointed Katrin Suder from McKinsey & Company as the ministry's state secretary. With the assistance of the consultants stemming from the Heer, Suder wanted to demolish bureaucratic barriers, which resulted in procurements arriving too late, over cost and at times lacking necessary components (Schmitt 110). Example of these delays is seen with the retardation of the Eurofighter Typhoon (13 years later), with a 38% increase in original cost (ibid). The Puma IFV came 6 years late and 50% over cost. In addition, the F125 Baden-Württemberg class frigate arrived 5 years late with 46% over cost. Suder left the ministry in 2018, leaving these problems unsolved (ibid).

German Strategic Culture

The ability of a country to apply military strategy and apply it for political objectives is heavily influenced by the values, cultures, and historical experiences that the nations people hold (Eccles 13). In the case of Germany, the memories of WW2 are still prevalent. This is shown by the fact that although a "distinct understanding of the role of military force" was established in the 1990s between the government and the people was successful, successive military deployments showed that the German 'culture of restraint' was still prevalent. Specifically, concerning the actual use of force in combat in operations (Noetzel and Schreer 219). In a research study conducted in 2000, the majority of the German public believed that future Bundeswehr deployments will be used in the context of multinational peacekeeping operations "in which German soldiers will be used predominantly as supportive elements of civilian reconstruction programmes" (ibid 219) (Mauil 56-80). Thus, it can be argued that Germany deliberately restrains itself from using decisive force to achieve national interests. Which begs the question as to what is even the point of an Armed Force? It was unilaterally agreed by the political dogma (fearing to be nicknamed 'warmongers') that force was to be only used as "an instrument within a wider strategic framework that emphasizes used only as an instrument within a wider strategic framework that emphasizes the non-military dimensions of security." (Noetzel and Schreer 219). In fact, survey data taken at the end of 2007 showed a majority consensus by the German public that continued support of non-combat operations must continue (Fiebig and Buhlamm 2007). However, the recent Russo-Ukrainian war and the atrocities committed by Russian forces in places such as Bucha and Irpin have caused public opinion to shift in Germany towards more expansion of the Bundeswehr. This shift in opinion also allowed German Chancellor Scholz to propose 'Zeitenwende.'

'Zeitenwende'

The return of collective defense as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war has resulted

in the announcement of 'Zeitenwende.' The war led to Germany to pledge support to NATO partners in the East, many of which lost confidence in their defense capabilities (Foreign Policy Research Institute). Scholz finally caved in into the voices in Germany calling for increased defense budgets. Scholz's policy of keeping the budget for the Bundeswehr at a minimum was adopted by Angela Merkel's government, since both politicians come from the same party (SPD). In early June 2022, the German parliament "passed the equivalent of two annual budgets" (Foreign Policy Research Institute), with the total of 100 billion euros and abiding by NATO's requests for at least 2% GDP to be allocated for the Armed Forces.

Yet is 100 billion enough? It could be argued that it isn't, especially when in 2021 the Bundeswehr stated that systematic shortcomings of equipment, housing problems and manpower shortage would need to be addressed; with the minimum requested funding of 102 billion euros (ibid). Should the Bundeswehr be ready for full mobilization against a territorial army, it will require double the amount requested in 2021. It must be clarified, that 'Zeitenwende' is not a strategic change of direction for Germany. Simply put, it just shows how a German government has finally decided to address multiple military problems. Such problems include buying new F-35s, modernizing the Luftwaffe's air fleet, addressing the serious budget cuts on the Deutsche Marine's Marineflieger (Naval Aviation), 20 billion to new Command & Control equipment (C&C) such as radio gear, satellite communications and networking hardware (Luck 2023).

For 'Zeitenwende' to work, it will need to be pledging 100 billion Euros and more at a consistent rate for the next decade. As of right now, the Bundeswehr is not prepared for a high-intensity war such as the one in Ukraine, and German Industry must work directly with the Bundeswehr for effective scale-up of production and multiple large-scale procurements and stop to rely on foreign defense markets. However, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has not yet declared any of these above-mentioned changes, only stating that a change will happen and allocating 100 billion euros to the Bundeswehr. Nobody knows where and how this money will be allocated

specifically and whether Scholz plans to do more. This makes 'Zeitenwende' seem hollow and "merely a flash in the pan" in German national security (Luck 4).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Bundeswehr has a long way to go to become a proper Armed Force, the structural problems such as manpower deficit and material problems are the greatest issues which need addressing. Even though 'Zeitenwende' can be seen as a turn for good, the vagueness by Chancellor Scholz's government as to where the 100 billion Euro budget will go to has left many on lookers with doubt. For example, will the lack of equipment such as ammunition and lack of winter equipment be addressed? Yet, the change in the strategic culture of Germans regarding the acts of the Russian army in Ukraine and the realization that a territorial conflict in Europe could occur again is a positive change for the Bundeswehr as it potentially means that more funding will be directed to it in the coming future. To finalize, the Bundeswehr needs hefty work to fix its inherent problems, and only constant funding and careful attention by the German government will success be guaranteed.

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